



# Enhancement in carbon dioxide activity and stability on nanostructured silver electrode and the role of oxygen

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## ABSTRACT

Current energy production habits deplete fossil fuels and accumulate atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, which contribute to the global climate change. Electrochemical fuel production via CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction is an idealistic yet an achievable process that mitigates CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and simultaneously satisfies energy demands. Here, the enhancement of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity and stability on size-controlled particulate Ag electrocatalysts derived from a simple, one-step cyclic voltammetry (CV) process by changing scan rates (1–200 mV/s) was demonstrated. Interestingly, larger nanoparticles prepared by slower scan rates (1–5 mV/s) have exhibited the most degree of enhancement for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to CO product. Compared to untreated Ag foil, nanostructured Ag electrode has shown an anodic shift of approximately 200 mV in the onset potential of CO partial current density ( $j_{\text{CO}}$ ), 160 mV reduction of overpotential at  $j_{\text{CO}} = 10 \text{ mA/cm}^2$ , and increased Faradaic efficiency (F.E.) for CO production especially at lower biased potentials (–0.89 to –1.19 V vs. RHE). Stability tests have demonstrated a drastic improvement in maintaining CO F.E. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy suggests that the enhancement is associated with stable oxygen species incorporated on the nanoparticle Ag surfaces during the CV fabrication process.

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## 1. Introduction

The global dependence on fossil fuel is not only depleting their stock but is contributing the climate change due to CO<sub>2</sub> emission during energy production [1,2]. Electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) is an attractive process that reconverts the greenhouse gas into valuable carbon compounds which decreases their atmospheric concentration and stores energy into chemical bonds at the same time [3]. Essentially being the reverse reaction of combustion, CO<sub>2</sub>RR is unfortunately endothermic and requires an external energy source that ultimately should not be from fossil fuels. Coincidentally, since many emerging renewable energies (such as solar and wind energies) have an issues with storing elec-

tricity, integration with CO<sub>2</sub>RR may mutually eliminate each other's disadvantages.

Although idealistically convenient, this is a challenging task technically because of the thermodynamically stable conformation of CO<sub>2</sub>. Hori et al. extensively studied the electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity on various metal foils but none were found to satisfy the material cost, product selectivity, long term stability, efficiency and safety requirements to be competitive in the economic market [4]. Another difficulty of electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub>RR is the prevalence competing hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) and low CO<sub>2</sub> solubility in aqueous solution, while nonaqueous or aprotic solution applications are often environmentally unfriendly and seldom produce high current density due to high solution resistance.

Moreover, density function theory (DFT) calculations estimated that it is difficult for individual bulk metals to selectively reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to CO at low overpotentials since their COOH binding energy and CO binding energy coordinates follow a trend line that lies in tangent to the kinetic volcano for CO evolution [5]. DFT calculations for CO<sub>2</sub> conversion to CH<sub>4</sub> and CH<sub>3</sub>OH also follow similar

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volcano plot correlation [6]. To overcome these limitations, another set of DFT calculations also hint that covalent embedment of Ag surfaces with p-block elements like S and Se could enhance the electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity by modulating COOH and CO binding free energies [7]. Additionally, research strategies that apply nanoparticles or nanostructured surfaces have demonstrated enhanced catalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR activities in terms of overpotential and product selectivity; however, exact reason for enhancement effects still remains controversial and requires more studies [8–16].

Among various techniques to fabricate nanostructured metal surfaces, reduction of metal oxides showed promising results in electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub>RR application. Representative of these results are modified Au and Cu surfaces through pulsed anodization of the former or thermal oxidation of the latter and subsequent reduction of their oxides, which were found to greatly enhance the intrinsic catalytic activity toward CO<sub>2</sub> reduction by Kanan Group [8,9]. Even most recently, oxide-derived Pb was reported to form HCO<sub>2</sub><sup>−</sup> selectively by suppressing HER [10]. Unfortunately, Au is one of the most expensive noble metal, Cu has poor selectivity among its several hydrocarbon products, and Pb is notoriously toxic. On the other hand, Ag is nontoxic, significantly cheaper than Au, and also has a high selectivity toward CO, a precursor in the Fischer–Tropsch process, despite relatively large overpotential required for CO production compared to Au. For reference, previous works concerning CO<sub>2</sub> reduction on Ag include bare surfaces [17], nanoparticles [11,12], and nanoporous [13] structures which suggest morphology of Ag is important in determining CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity. As of yet, nanostructured Ag induced from silver oxide have not been studied for CO<sub>2</sub>RR electrocatalysts.

Here, we demonstrate that nanostructure formation of Ag is possible when Ag is processed under cyclic voltammetry (CV) in a basic solution and can enhance CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity and stability. This facile, one-step process has an added benefit of size-control by simply adjusting the scan rate [18]. This study has reveals an interesting perspective in the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction capability of nanostructured Ag electrodes fabricated at various scan rates. Contrary to our initial expectations, larger nanoparticles around 100–200 nm were found to have mostly enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity toward CO evolution by reducing the required overpotential. In addition, nanostructured Ag samples also showed a remarkable stability in CO Faradaic efficiency (F.E.). Herein, properties and plausible reasons for the unusual CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity of nanostructured Ag are presented.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Preparation of nanostructured Ag

The p-Ag electrocatalyst sample was prepared by first mechanically polishing a Ag foil (25 × 25 × 0.5 mm, Dasom RMS) surface with 1.0 μm and 0.05 μm alumina polishing slurries (Micropolish®, Buhler) for 15 min each. After each polishing session, the Ag foil was thoroughly washed with and ultrasonicated several times in deionized (DI) water to remove alumina residue and the unpolished reverse side was covered with electrically insulating tape. Then CV was performed in a beaker with 100 mL aqueous 0.1 M NaOH (98.0%, Samchun Chemicals) solution (pH 12.7) with the obverse side facing toward the Pt wire counter electrode and Ag/AgCl reference electrode. Each sample was subjected to five cycles of CV from −0.9 V to 1.0 V vs. Ag/AgCl at varying scan rates (1, 5, 50, and 200 mV/s) and was rinsed with DI water.

### 2.2. Electrochemical surface area measurement

Electrochemical surface area (ECSA) was measured by adopting an underpotential deposition (UPD) of Pb method [11,12]. CV was

performed in aqueous 5 mM Pb(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> (≥99.0%, Sigma–Aldrich), 10 mM HNO<sub>3</sub>, and 10 mM KCl (99.9%, Sigma–Aldrich) solution between −0.05 V and −0.50 V vs. Ag/AgCl at a scan rate of 10 mV/s.

### 2.3. CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction experiment

Electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub>RR experiments were conducted in an airtight two-compartment polyether ether ketone (PEEK) cell separated by a proton exchange membrane (Nafion®, 117). Both compartments held 38 mL aqueous 0.5 M KHCO<sub>3</sub> (≥99.99%, Sigma–Aldrich) solution and were purged with 120 sccm CO<sub>2</sub> until saturated (pH 7.0) for 1 h before the experiment and the CO<sub>2</sub> flow was maintained for its duration. Working electrode (*i.e.*, mechanically polished Ag foil or p-Ag samples) and Ag/AgCl reference electrode were positioned in the catholyte that was stirred at 350 rpm with a magnetic stir bar and the Pt counter electrode was placed in the anolyte. A constant potential was applied with a potentiostat (Ivium, Iviumtechnology) and gaseous products were analyzed by gas chromatography (GC, Yonglin 6500) equipped with a capillary column (Restek, RT®-Msieve 5A) and pulsed discharge ionization detector (PDD) using ultra high purity (UHP, 99.9999%) He as the carrier gas. The F.E. of H<sub>2</sub> or CO was calculated according to the following equations,

$$i_{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}} = V_{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}} \times Q \times \frac{2Fp}{RT}$$

$$F.E._{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}} = \frac{i_{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}}}{i} \times 100$$

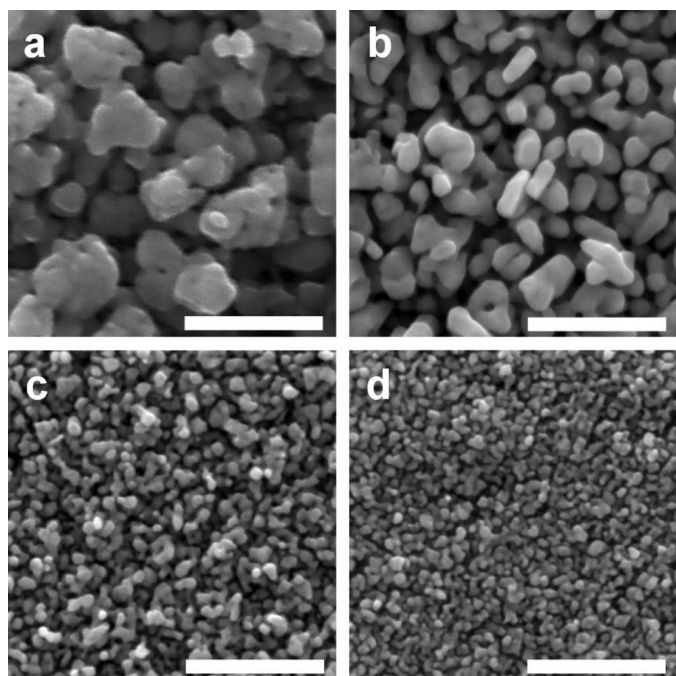
where  $i_{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}}$  is the partial current density of H<sub>2</sub> or CO,  $V_{\text{H}_2/\text{CO}}$  is the volume concentration of H<sub>2</sub> or CO measured by GC,  $Q$  is the flow rate measured by a universal flow meter (ADM 2000, Agilent Technologies) at the exit of the electrochemical cell,  $i$  is the total current density,  $F$  is the Faradaic constant,  $p$  is the pressure,  $T$  is the temperature, and  $R$  is the ideal gas constant.

Liquid products were also analyzed by ion chromatography (IC, DIONEX IC25A). The procedure was repeated for various potentials. Solution resistance,  $R_s$ , was measured by circle fitting the measurement taken from electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) and potential values were compensated for  $iR$  loss and converted in terms of reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE) by using the following equation:

$$E(\text{vs. RHE}) = E(\text{vs. Ag/AgCl}) + 0.197V + (0.0591 \times \text{pH})$$

### 2.4. Characterization

The surface morphologies were obtained by field emission gun scanning electron microscopy (FEG–SEM, Inspect F, FEI). The crystal structure was confirmed by measuring X-ray diffraction (XRD-6000, Shimadzu). To analyze the surface element composition, high-resolution X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) experiments were performed at the 8A2 beamline at the Pohang Accelerator Laboratory (PAL), which was equipped with an electron analyzer (SES100, Gamma-Data Scientia). The Ag3d and O 1s core level spectra were obtained by using photon energies of 420 and 580 eV respectively to enhance the surface sensitivity. The binding energies of the core level spectra were determined with respect to the binding energies ( $E_B$  = 84.0 eV) of the clean Au 4f core level for the same photon energy. <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> isotope gas was purchased from Cambridge Isotope Laboratories and was conducted with a gas chromatograph (GC, 6890N network, Agilent Technologies) equipped with a mass-selective detector (MSD, 5973 network, Agilent Technologies).

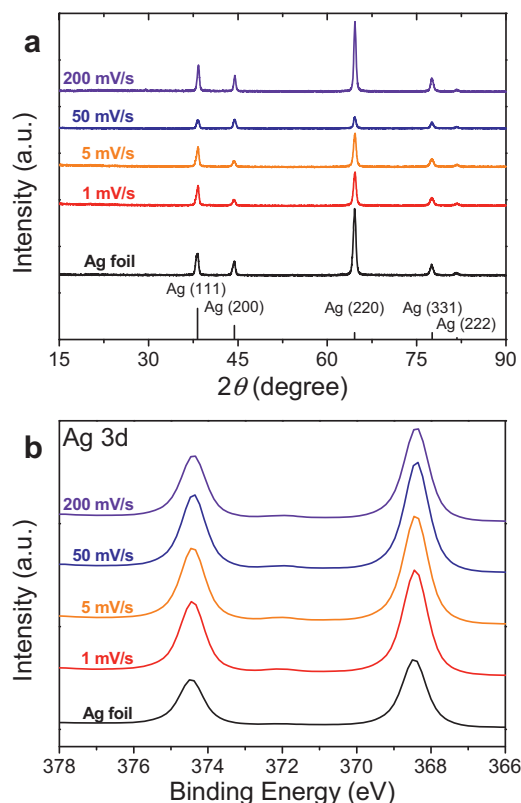


**Fig. 1.** (a–d) Scanning electron micrographs of p-Ag samples fabricated in 0.1 M NaOH after five cycles of cyclic voltammetry between  $-0.9$  V and  $1.0$  V vs. Ag/AgCl at 1, 5, 50, and 200 mV/s, respectively (scale bar = 500 nm).

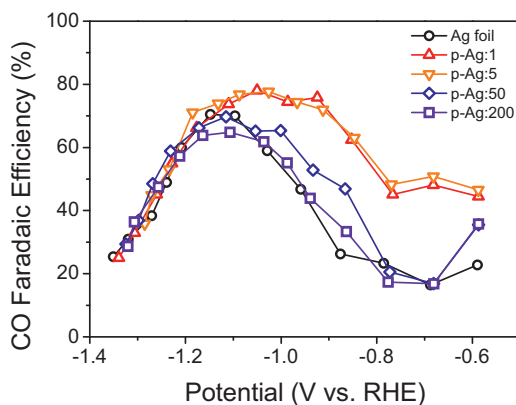
### 3. Results and discussion

CV of Ag foil in 0.1 M NaOH solution exhibited two distinct anodic peaks and two distinct cathodic peaks (Fig. S1), which respectively correspond to the formations and reductions of two silver oxides ( $\text{Ag}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{AgO}$ ). A less obvious oxidation peak at  $0.20$  V vs. Ag/AgCl is attributed to the formation of  $\text{Ag}_2\text{O}$  or  $\text{AgOH}$  monolayer. Peaks broaden and increase in current as scan rate increase, and the current saturates at the fifth cycle (Fig. S1(a)–(d)). Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images show layer formations of  $142 \pm 44$ ,  $104 \pm 33$ ,  $41 \pm 11$ , and  $28 \pm 7.6$  nm particles for Ag samples treated with scan rates at 1, 5, 50, and 200 mV/s (henceforth called p-Ag:1, p-Ag:5, p-Ag:50, and p-Ag:200; Fig. 1(a)–(d) and Table S1), respectively, compared to the featureless topology of the untreated Ag foil surface (Fig. S2(a)). Larger and less uniform nanostructures were obtained as the scan rate decreased, and curved structures were formed regardless of CV conditions. These nanostructured morphologies are consistent with observations by Wan et al. who reasoned that the smaller, more uniform size distribution is a consequence of less agglomeration time at higher scan rates. Conversely, at lower scan rates, nanocrystals have a longer period to agglomerate resulting in the larger and less uniform features [18].

Next, to estimate the surface area of the nanostructured p-Ag samples, electrochemical surface area (ECSA) measurements were taken, in which the roughness factors were derived from the integrals of the CV peaks corresponding to the underpotential deposition (UPD) of Pb (Fig. S3). Relative to that of Ag foil, the roughness factors were 7.65, 4.15, 2.38, and 1.72 for p-Ag:1, p-Ag:5, p-Ag:50, and p-Ag:200, respectively (Table S1). Despite smaller particles having greater surface-to-volume ratios, the unexpected increase in the ECSA with increasing particle size is attributed to the relatively thicker formation nanoparticle layers. This is evident as more charge passed during the formation and reduction in CV measurements at lower scan rates (Fig. S1(e)). Darker p-Ag samples were obtained as the scan rate decreased which also indicates thicker film formation of p-Ag.



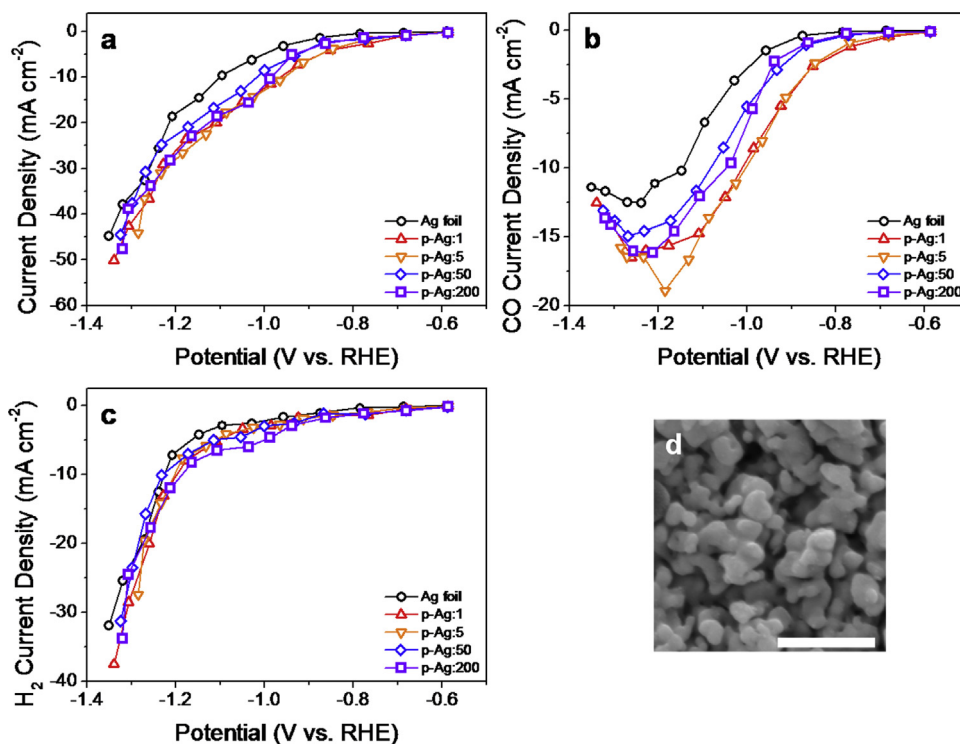
**Fig. 2.** (a) XRD patterns and (b) XPS Ag 3d peaks of untreated Ag foil and p-Ag samples fabricated at various scan rates.



**Fig. 3.** CO F.E. vs. applied potential of Ag foil and p-Ag samples.

X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns for all samples show  $2\theta$  peaks at  $38.2^\circ$ ,  $44.4^\circ$ ,  $64.6^\circ$ ,  $77.6^\circ$ , and  $81.8^\circ$  which all correspond to diffractions along the (1 1 1), (2 0 0), (2 2 0), (3 1 1), and (2 2 2) planes of the face-centered cubic Ag crystal structure (Fig. 2(a)). A particularly intense (2 2 0) peak for the Ag foil suggests a preferred crystal orientation. Meanwhile, the relative intensities of the each diffraction pattern for the p-Ag samples more closely resemble the powder Ag reference peaks from a crystallography database showing relative increase of (1 1 1) peak compared to the Ag foil. The exception of p-Ag:200 having a similar diffraction pattern to that of Ag foil is explained by the penetration depth of incident X-ray detecting the unaltered phase underneath the thinner nanoparticle layers. All of the XRD patterns were associated with the Ag crystal structure and no crystalline silver oxide phases were observed.

In addition, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) spectra show that Ag foil and all p-Ag samples have Ag 3d peaks at  $368.4$  eV



**Fig. 4.** (a) Total, (b) H<sub>2</sub> partial, and (c) CO partial current densities vs. applied potential of Ag foil and p-Ag samples. (d) SEM images of p-Ag:5 taken post-CO<sub>2</sub> RR.

and 374.4 eV, which are assigned to Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and Ag 3d<sub>3/2</sub> peaks, respectively (Fig. 2(b)). All p-Ag samples have similar binding energies of Ag 3d peaks with that of Ag foil, which suggests that Ag<sub>2</sub>O or AgO formed during its fabrication was mostly reduced to metallic Ag upon completion of CV. Detailed XPS analysis revealed that there were two small Ag 3d peaks associated with oxidized Ag states for Ag foil as well as p-Ag samples, which are considered to be natively formed on the Ag surface (discussed below.) Even if there was small amount of residual silver oxide on the nanostructured p-Ag samples, they were expected to be reduced to Ag under the cathodic potentials applied during CO<sub>2</sub> RR.

CO<sub>2</sub> RR experiments for Ag foil and all p-Ag samples yielded CO as the main product with trace CH<sub>4</sub> (<1% F.E.) and balance H<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 3). Analysis of liquid products (such as formic acid) did not detect any concentrations above the IC's detection limit, which was consistent with the previous studies with polycrystalline Ag foil [4,17]. In other words, H<sub>2</sub> F.E. would be the complement of CO F.E. (or H<sub>2</sub> F.E. = 100% – CO F.E.) since H<sub>2</sub> and CO are the only species produced from the catholyte. The CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity is enhanced in terms of required overpotential to achieve maximum F.E. for CO production as the scan rates applied to fabricate p-Ag decrease. Both of p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5 electrodes had over 70% of CO F.E. at a potential as low as –0.89 V vs. RHE, which was 200 mV lower in overpotential compared to Ag foil (–1.09 V vs. RHE). In addition, comparing CO F.E. at the given bias potential (–0.89 V vs. RHE), the p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5 electrodes achieved approximately 30% higher CO F.E. than Ag foil. Although having similar CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activities, p-Ag:5 was selected over p-Ag:1 as the optimal condition for comparison studies from here on due to the shorter preparation time.

The breadths of CO F.E. vs. applied potential curves (Fig. 3) tend to broaden toward lower overpotentials while converging at –1.20 V vs. RHE; for instance, only a single point reaches 70% CO F.E. at –1.12 V vs. RHE for Ag foil but for p-Ag:5 a “potential window” of 310 mV that satisfies similar CO F.E. range from –0.89 V to –1.18 V vs. RHE. The wide potential window is advantageous in applications, such as solar-fuel devices incorporated with a pho-

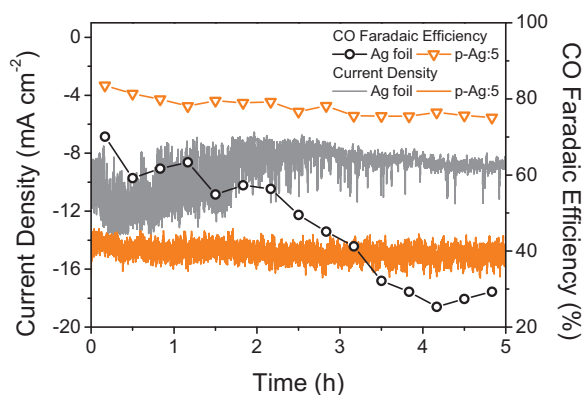
tovoltaic cell, because CO selectivity can be maintained even at variable operation potentials with small coupling loss [19]. Overall, Fig. 3 represents the evolution of CO<sub>2</sub> RR activities, where the CO F.E. vs. applied potential curves for p-Ag:200 and p-Ag:50 gradually shifts from that of Ag foil to that of the most active p-Ag:5 and p-Ag:1.

Despite having different ECSA's, p-Ag samples merged to similar current densities at potentials greater than –1.10 V vs. RHE (Fig. 4(a)) most likely due to CO<sub>2</sub> mass transfer limitations. More interestingly, the onset potential of the CO partial current density shifts anodically with p-Ag samples compared to bulk Ag foil, and both p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5 showed similar shifts by approximately 200 mV (Fig. 4(b)), which was consistent with the enhancement of CO F.E. results as shown in Fig. 3. Also, at CO partial current density of 10 mA/cm<sup>2</sup>, a 160 mV reduction in the overpotential was measured with these two p-Ag samples. The onset potential shift and overpotential reduction also occurred for p-Ag:50 and p-Ag:200 albeit at a lesser extent (Table S1). Nevertheless, all p-Ag cathodes have proven to catalytically reduce the overpotentials for CO<sub>2</sub> to CO production compared to polycrystalline Ag foil.

Previously, different Ag facets were reported to have some variance in the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity but Ag(111) and Ag(100) were catalytically inert relative to Ag(110) [20]. Because our p-Ag samples exhibited lower onset potentials than the most active Ag(110) facet, the enhanced activity cannot be explained with the mentioned Ag facets alone. Other reference on nanoporous Ag material speculates that high-index facets are more active toward CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in exhibiting a significant reduction in the overpotential. Meanwhile, the CO<sub>2</sub> electroreduction size-controlled nanoparticle study reports an improvement in the CO partial current density with no effect on the onset potential even though smaller nanoparticle have more high-index facets. Therefore, further studies are still required to understand the origins of decrease in overpotential with nanostructured CO<sub>2</sub> electrocatalysts.

From another perspective, the H<sub>2</sub> partial current densities of the electrochemically prepared p-Ag were compared in Fig. 4(c). At





**Fig. 5.** (a) Total current densities and (b) CO F.E.'s of Ag foil and p-Ag:5 at  $-1.80$  V vs. Ag/AgCl. The  $iR$ -corrected potentials are about  $-1.10$  V and  $-1.04$  V vs. RHE, respectively.

lower bias potential ranges from  $-0.95$  V vs. RHE, p-Ag:50 and p-Ag:200 exhibited greater hydrogen evolution activity, while p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5 approached comparable  $H_2$  partial current densities with that of Ag foil. The divergence of  $H_2$  partial current densities converges at higher bias potentials. The nonproportionality of  $H_2$  evolution activity to the roughness factor indicates that HER active sites did not increase with increasing ECSA. Rather, smaller nanoparticles fabricated with higher scan rates are slightly more active toward HER at lower overpotentials, which may be related to the poorer  $CO_2$ RR activity with p-Ag:50 and p-Ag:200 than p-Ag:5. In other words, the electrochemical treatment of Ag surfaces was able to keep HER active sites relatively constant while increasing  $CO_2$ RR active sites, which, consequently, widened potential window for CO evolution.

In addition, SEM images of p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5 (Figs. 4(d) and S2(b)) after  $CO_2$ RR lasting 2.5 h remained identical to the images before, while p-Ag:50 nanoparticles appeared to have agglomerated and p-Ag:200 became unrecognizable as the original nanoparticles disappeared (Fig. S2(c) and (d)) even after the same  $CO_2$ RR conditioning. We expect that the lower  $CO_2$  reduction to CO production activity with p-Ag:200 as shown in Figs. 3 and 4 are associated with the changes of the nanostructures on the Ag electrode surface as well. It is interesting to note that these trends are contrary to the initial expectation that smaller nanoparticles have more edge or high index sites that are more active toward  $CO_2$  reduction and better stabilize the  $CO_2^-$  intermediate [11–13]. p-Ag samples fabricated by our electrochemical methods showed that the optimal size of the nanoparticles were around 100–200 nm for  $CO_2$ RR, and the smaller sized particles (30–50 nm) had poor activities due to the tendency for agglomeration. Curiously, even comparing similar particle sizes, i.e., pre- $CO_2$ RR p-Ag:5 (Fig. 1(b)) and post- $CO_2$ RR p-Ag:50 (Fig. S2(c)), yields differing CO F.E. profiles, which indicates that morphology is not the only factor that affects the activity and stability for  $CO_2$ RR with p-Ag samples and is discussed below.

To examine the  $CO_2$ RR activity further, the electrocatalytic stability of p-Ag:5 and Ag foil samples were compared by performing a durability test for 5 h under the same bias potential (Fig. 5). In both tests,  $-1.8$  V vs. Ag/AgCl were applied to compare the samples at their maximum CO F.E. Throughout the 5 h stability test, both Ag foil and p-Ag:5 electrodes showed stable current densities, but the CO F.E. differences were dramatic. Although Ag foil was able to sustain an almost consistent current density, the CO F.E. continued to drop from 70.0% to 29.3% after 5 h. This implies that the initial active sites for  $CO_2$ RR for CO production convert to be more active toward HER. In comparison, p-Ag:5 maintained a constant current density throughout the electrocatalytic process and only dropped

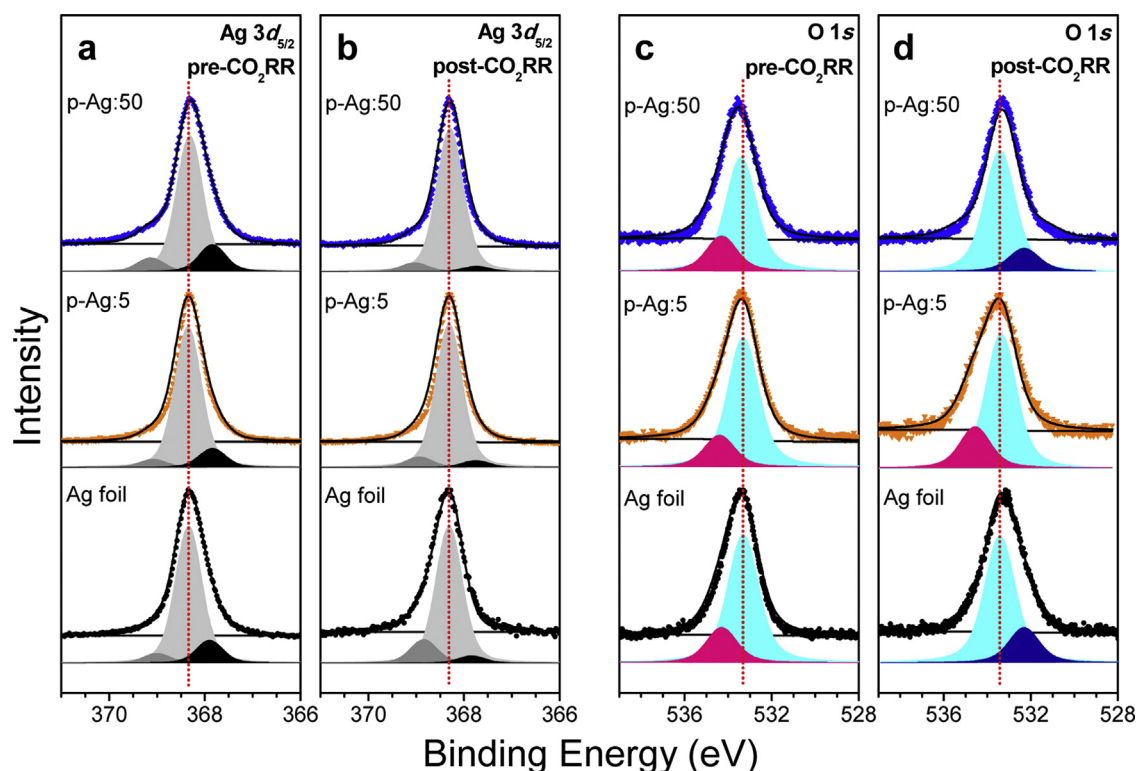
8.4% from the initial 83.5% CO F.E. The unchanged morphology of p-Ag:5 after  $CO_2$ RR may have contributed to its enhanced stability.

Some insights may be drawn from electrochemical kinetics with Tafel analysis (Fig. S4). The Tafel slopes for both Ag foil and p-Ag samples were about 140 mV/dec indicating  $CO_2$ RR mechanism where single-electron transfer is the rate-limiting step for all samples. However, when comparing Ag foil to p-Ag:1 there was almost a two-magnitude increase in exchange current density which demonstrates an enhanced intrinsic catalytic activity through the increasing of kinetic constant for  $CO_2$  reduction (Table S1). In addition, electrolysis with  $^{13}CO_2$  isotope confirmed that the source of C was indeed from  $CO_2$  and not the dissolved  $KHCO_3$  in the electrolyte (Fig. S5). If the carbonate ions composed of nonspecific C isotopes were reduced, GC-MS would have detected  $^{12}CO$  instead of  $^{13}CO$ , but only  $^{13}CO$  was detected proving  $CO_2$  gas was the only C source in our reduction reaction.

Upon closer analysis with high resolution beamline XPS for three representative Ag samples (i.e. Ag foil, p-Ag:5, and p-Ag:50 samples) before and after  $CO_2$ RR, subtle yet significant differences in the surface electronic states of Ag and O species were discovered (Fig. 6). The *ex-situ* XPS elemental analysis measured surface oxygen contents of about 20 atomic% for all samples (Table S1) which can be formed under ambient condition. This observation lead to a hypothesis that natively adsorbed or residual surface oxygen species may have contributed to the  $CO_2$ RR activity. Oxygen has been shown to play a critical role in  $CO_2$ RR on the Sn/SnO<sub>x</sub> thin-film electrocatalyst [21] and oxygen vacancy sites are thought to be the  $CO_2$  reduction sites for TiO<sub>2</sub> and other metal oxide semiconductor photocatalysts [22]. Another study proposed that an ultrathin, kinetically stable oxide or hydroxide can suppresses HER [10].

All XPS measurements retained their major peaks at 368.4 eV and 374.4 eV for the two Ag 3d peaks (i.e., Ag<sup>0</sup>) and at 533.3 eV for O 1s (i.e., adsorbed OH<sup>-</sup> and H<sub>2</sub>O). For simplicity, the Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> peak will be described in detail over the Ag 3d<sub>3/2</sub> peak, which is exactly identical. For all three samples, as-prepared pre- $CO_2$ RR samples revealed same Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and O 1s spectra (Fig. 6(a) and (c)). There were similar two minor Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> peaks at 368.9 and 367.9 eV (Fig. 6(a)), which are respectively associated with Ag<sup>+</sup> and Ag<sup>3+</sup> states [23], and the O 1s spectra also contained a similar minor peak at 534.5 eV (Fig. 6(c)), which is attributed to oxygen in a strongly electronegative environment [24]. Note the proportions of the deconvoluted minor peaks were similar for these measurements indicating Ag foil and p-Ag samples have similar electronic states before  $CO_2$ RR. In addition, no O 1s peaks associated with metal oxides (i.e., Ag<sub>2</sub>O or AgO) were present (approximately 529 eV) for as prepared samples.

After  $CO_2$ RR, however, the minor peaks underwent a few changes, especially with O 1s spectra, depending on the Ag samples. The 368.9 and 367.9 eV of Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> peaks were deintensified as the Ag<sup>+</sup> and Ag<sup>3+</sup> states became reduced in the reductive condition of  $CO_2$ RR (Fig. 6(b)). More conspicuously, the 534.5 eV O 1s peak disappeared for both of Ag foil and p-Ag:50 samples (Fig. 6(d)); however, instead a new peak with lower binding energy appeared at 532.3 eV, which is attributed to surface-bound hydroxyl species [25]. On the other hand, 534.5 eV peak of the p-Ag:5 sample endured without an appearance of extra O 1s peaks even after  $CO_2$ RR, which implies that the CV process employed in this study may have formed a stable oxygen species on p-Ag:5 surface that is resistant to collateral damage even in the reductive environment of  $CO_2$ RR. The XPS results can explain the disparity in Ag foil and p-Ag:5 for  $CO_2$ RR activity and stability. Slower CV cycles of oxidation and subsequent reduction can affect oxygen species on p-Ag surfaces until a saturation in activity is achieved as seen in p-Ag:1 and p-Ag:5. Although, further studies are required to identify the nature of the oxygen species on the Ag surface, this hypothesis can be extended to other oxide-derived electrocatalysts which may also



**Fig. 6.** Normalized XPS (a and b) Ag 3d<sub>5/2</sub> and (c and d) O 1s peaks of untreated Ag foil, p-Ag:5, and p-Ag:50 (a and c) pre- and (b and d) post-CO<sub>2</sub>RR. The deconvoluted peaks are offset from the fitted and base lines (black solid) for clarity. Vertical red dots are to guide the reader's eye to distinguish various species.

have residual oxygen content that contributes to the enhancement of CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

The scope of this study was purposefully limited by having the CV scan rate be the only variable for designing a more complete set of experiments to better understand the origin for the enhanced electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub>RR. It can be expected that other parameter modifications, such as adjusting the strength of the basic solution, using pulsed oxidation/reduction instead of CV, and even using different synthetic approaches of oxidation/reduction beyond an electrochemical method, could further optimize the catalytic properties. We hope that sharing such findings may contribute to the academic community by furthering the scientific understanding of how CO<sub>2</sub> can be electrocatalytically reduced.

#### 4. Conclusions

Improvement in CO<sub>2</sub> reduction activity and stability toward CO was achieved on p-Ag electrodes fabricated by a facile, one-step electrochemical CV process, in which Ag was repeatedly oxidized and reduced in a basic electrolyte. The sizes of the nanoparticles formed on the Ag foil were controlled in the range of 30–200 nm by varying the scan rate, whose influence on the CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity yielded higher activity with larger sized p-Ag electrodes. More specifically, p-Ag:5 with approximately 100 nm nanoparticles was able to shift the onset potential of the CO partial current density anodically by approximately 200 mV and reduce the overpotential by 160 mV when compared to the untreated Ag foil. The 310 mV expansion of the CO F.E. potential window was possible due to the electrochemical treatment of Ag surfaces keeping HER active sites relatively constant while increasing the reaction sites active toward CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Stability tests demonstrated a drastic improvement of CO F.E. stability where p-Ag:5 was able to maintain a stable current and CO F.E. The slower scan rate applied for p-Ag fabrication exhibited more

enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity, associated with stable oxygen species incorporated on Ag surfaces during the fabrication process.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2015.06.046>

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